**Sermon**

Romans 6: 1-11

Recently the Baptist Missionary Society published on its website an item entitled – wait for it! – ‘Ten reasons why nobody seems to care about climate change any more: bad science, bad theology, how we’re wired and our sense of failure: none of it happening.’ It’s not the snappiest title in the world, so let me give you that again: …

At first it might seem strange that the Baptist Missionary Society is publishing articles on climate change. It’s not a topic that you instinctively feel would be a major concern to a group committed to old-fashioned overseas mission. Actually, the BMS is only one of a number of Christian organisations that have developed a significant concern about climate change; Christian Aid, Tearfund and SCIAF come to mind. Like the BMS they are Christian groups whose major focus lies elsewhere but feel that they can no longer ignore climate change because it is impacting so significantly upon the lives of many people with whom they work, in various countries around the world.

The ‘Ten reasons …’ from the BMS provides explanations why climate change receives such a muted response in the part of the world where we live. Among them they list the overly cautious statements of scientist which have allowed wiggle-room for self-interested opponents to cast doubt on the existence of climate change; the fact that climate change is an issue that we cannot bomb and therefore it is not amenable to simple or simplistic responses; and that climate change does not touch church folks in the instinctive, visceral way that other issues do – ‘if only gay sex caused climate change,’ the article says, ‘think how that debate would move to centre-stage in church life’.

Amongst the ‘ten reasons’ are three that I think could have come straight from Saint Paul himself, if only he was still around and blogging in the twenty-first century. Baptists, by the way, have a fine tradition of reading Saint Paul, so we should expect his writing to influence their thinking about climate change; and that, to me at least, makes the prospect of the ghost of Saint Paul posting on a website rather attractive.

The three reasons given for people giving up on climate change that resonate with the ‘Pauline’ side of my personality are: firstly, ‘It’s the economy stupid’, secondly, ‘we have bad theology’ and thirdly, ‘we’ve lost hope’. And all of these could have been written by Saint Paul because they all relate to a phenomenon central to Paul’s understanding of reality and which is a part of all our lives: sin!

‘Sin’ is not a popular word these days, not even in church circles. A few years ago I took a part in an ecumenical Lent discussion group. In one meeting we were exploring why things go wrong in life. Conversation flowed along the lines that it is puzzling that despite knowing what is the right thing to do, people (ourselves included) have a tendency to continue doing things we know are not good for ourselves or others. When, I tentatively suggested to the group that the word ‘sin’ might be a handy, simple word to describe this situation other members expressed surprise and dismay: ‘you can’t go around calling people sinners,’ they said. I wonder how Saint Paul would have responded to that, but then I’m no Saint Paul.

‘Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?’ asks Paul. ‘By no means!’ says he, providing the answer to his own rhetorical question. ‘How can we who died to sin go on living in it?’ (11: 1-2) How can we go on living in it? That’s a good question to ask of our involvement in the twenty-first century globalised economy. In our heart of hearts we know, don’t we, that the world economy cannot continue in its present from without doing continuing damage to many people on the planet and perhaps irreparable damage to the planet itself. This model is utterly dependant on continuing to uncover, retrieve and burn huge quantities of fossil fuels, for the purposes of manufacture, transport and energy production. This produces massive amounts of CO2, which will lead to a rise in the overall temperature of the planet, with malign effects for both present and future generations.

Yet we (and I include myself here) struggle to live in an alternative, healthier way. I continue to expect my supermarket foods to appear from around the world, to watch successive World Cups on successively bigger television screens, to drive my car where and when I will, and to holiday abroad at least once a year. As a Westerner I’m a major beneficiary of this economic system and I’d rather off-load the problems into God’s hands, to find a solution somewhere in the future; rather than in anything I might do or not do today. Let God have the credit for sorting things out in the world; I continue in sin in order that God’s grace may abound. Saint Paul (and God, I suspect) is unimpressed: ‘Should we continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!’

Yet it is not just ‘the economy, stupid!’ There is also the second statement I’ve picked out from the BMS’s ten reasons why nobody seems to care about climate change: ‘we have bad theology’. In many churches ‘theology’ is almost as popular a word as ‘sin’. Theology, many think, is some abstract, academic exercise, beloved by church ministers, but not by normal people, providing obscure answers to questions that neither church goers nor the wider world are actually asking. Yet ‘theology’ simply means, ‘talk about God’, and the BMS (and Saint Paul) thinks we have not been very good at this as far as climate change is concerned.

Many of us have bought into the view that when the final time comes, God will simply dispense with the earth, burn it up, destroy it; though, of course, not before insuring that his people (among whom we modestly number ourselves) are provided with alternative, spiritual accommodation elsewhere, in heaven. That picture ignores biblical images of God renewing, not destroying the earth at the end, as for example in the closing chapters of the Book of Revelation, where the picture is of heaven, in the form of a holy city, descending to earth, that the world might be renewed; God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven. Think of God’s creation as something to be burned up, something disposable, and soon one begins to view the Earth as something of lesser value, little to be cared for by its current inhabitants.

Once that’s how we think God views creation we are also more prone to view its different peoples with less regard, especially those peoples that we see as different from us because of their different, race, location or religion. Fail to take God’s love for creation seriously and a deficit in how **we** love God’s creation and its other inhabitants is soon sets in. And failure to love God and neighbour, says Jesus, is failure to keep God’s law; and transgressing law, of course, is one of the ways of describing ‘sin’.

Saint Paul in his time was asked questions about what happens to us and our bodies when we die, and he took some trouble to try to provide answers to troubling questions. His answers are tantalising rather than detailed, but they are anchored in the idea of resurrection, including of our bodies, not some form of escape mechanism for our spirits. If the material creation matters to God then so does that material aspect of it – our bodies. And here, in Paul’s words to Christians in Rome, we find the basis for his view: ‘if we have been united with him [with Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (6: 5)

God so concerned, so in love with this world, models in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, the process we all go through. We experience the reality of death but only with the prospect of resurrection (bodies included). That which concerns God concerns his people – us included; this material world, this tactile world, of rock and stone, plant and tree, river and ocean, wind and rain. And it is bad theology – bad talk of and about God – to then act as if God’s material world does not matter, especially when it and its inhabitants are threatened by humanly induced climatic change.

All of which brings us neatly to our third failing with regard to climate change: we’ve lost hope. Now in a sense that’s perfectly understandable. After all, how can we hope to influence the twenty-first century global financial system: the economy, stupid! How do we find the words to confound those who think that God’s happy to burn up the planet at the end, or what do we say to people whose concern for their own – their own family, friends, nation or whatever – far outweighs their consideration for those people and peoples who fail to make it into the favoured group; especially if there is something of that that attitude lodged within our own minds and hearts.

Saint Paul, however, for all the setbacks he encountered in his life, remained a hope-filled follower of Jesus, so once again, and finally, we look to Paul for inspiration, and once again we find it in this particular passage of scripture. In the face of sin, which infects all of human existence, Paul does not despair. He remains hopeful and his hope is grounded in the resurrection. If death itself can be overcome by God then there is nothing (sin in all its manifestations included) that cannot be overcome by God: ‘Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God’ (6: 9-10), says Saint Paul.

Not that any of this encourages us to rest upon our laurels. That ultimately God is control is reason for hope, not grounds that absolve us of responsibility for how we lead our lives. Instead, to quotes the closing words of today’s Bible passage from Paul’s letter to Rome, ‘So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God.’ (6: 11)

That’s what we are called to be today: dead to the sin of pursuing economic benefit at the price of planet’s life; and alive to finding a better way to share God-given economic resources. Dead to the sin of regarding the planet and its inhabitants as disposable commodities, fit only for burning at the end; and alive to God’s love of the material world, seen in the life, death **and resurrection** of Jesus Christ. Dead to sin of despair, to loss of hope; and alive to the power of God to overcome in the end. In fact, as far as this world is concerned, as Saint Paul would say, we must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (6: 11)